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Making Sense of the War in Afghanistan

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Abstract

What does a reading of Karl Weick's work add to our understanding of strategy? To address this question I first outline some of the principal ideas that inform the Weick-inspired sensemaking perspective – sensemaking, organizing and enactment. Second, drawing on Martin (2014) these concepts are applied in order to analyze the West's strategy failure in Afghanistan, focusing in particular on the activities of the British and Americans in Helmand province. American and British strategizing, I argue, was hamstrung by a failure to understand adequately the history, context, people, actions and events in which they were embroiled: that is, there was a failure of sensemaking. This exploration suggests the value of sensemaking theory not just to academics but also to corporate strategists and military commanders. Although the nature of this failure and its implications for the West's strategies are analyzed primarily with reference to Weick, I draw also on the broader sensemaking literature especially that which recognizes the linguistic, and in particular narrative character of sensemaking processes. Finally, some limitations of this analysis and the sensemaking perspective generally are briefly considered.

Key Words

Sensemaking, Karl Weick, Organizing, Enactment, War, Afghanistan, Strategy, Strategy as Practice, Narrative

Lauded both for his theorizing and pragmatic insights, Karl Weick is one of the most influential thinkers in strategic management (Ramos-Rodriguez and Ruiz-Navarro, 2004) and organization studies (Sutcliffe et al., 2006). Gioia (2006, p.1710) has argued that Weick, undoubtedly '…"changed the conversation" of our field', and Czarniawska (2006, p.1672) has praised his works as '…a source of wisdom and consolation'. Drawing on a broad range of ideas, associated with scholars as diverse as Allport, Ashby, Bateson, Heidegger, Husserl, and Schultz, among others, Weick has helped to refocus a generation of academic social scientists on processes rather than structures and organizing rather than organizations. While he is associated principally with what is generally referred to as the 'sensemaking perspective' (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2014), he has also contributed to diverse other literatures including those on loose coupling, organizations as interpretive systems, improvisation, organizing for high reliability, and requisite variety (Weick, 1969, 1979, 1995). Perhaps most resonant with contemporary strategy scholarship is his 'phenomenological emphasis on lived experience' (Sutcliffe et al., 2006, p.1574) and recognition of '…the centrality of language and interaction in the social construction of organizational realities' (Eisenberg, 2006, p.1693).

In this paper, I foreground some of the ideas of Karl Weick and discuss how they are relevant to our understanding of strategy, drawing principally on Martin's (2014) analysis of what went wrong with American and British strategizing in Afghanistan[i]. The key argument that Martin (2014) makes, and which I explore and elaborate further, is that American and British strategy implementation was hamstrung by a failure to understand adequately the history, context, people, actions and events in which they were embroiled: that is, there was a failure of sensemaking. The nature of this failure and its implications for the West's strategies are analyzed primarily with reference to Weick, but I draw also, though to a more limited extent,

on the broader sensemaking literature, in particular that which recognizes the linguistic, especially narrative character of sensemaking processes (Boje, 1991; Brown, 2000; Gephart, 1993). No single account, of course, can do full justice to the complexities inherent in a prolonged series of military interventions fought over many years across a large country, and nor is it feasible to survey meaningfully every concept relevant to strategy associated with Karl Weick's work, and my aims here are appropriately modest[ii].

I begin by outlining some of the key features of the Weick-inspired sensemaking movement and consider how they have been employed in the strategy literature. An account of my research design is then followed by several sections which provide an analysis of the West's strategic failure in Afghanistan from a sensemaking perspective. This exploration shows the value of Weick's work for academics, practising corporate strategists and military commanders. Finally, I consider weaknesses of the sensemaking literature and draw some brief conclusions.

1. Karl Weick, Strategy and Organizing

Karl Weick is most closely associated with the 'sensemaking perspective' which has its origins in late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholarship (Dewey, 1922; James, 1890; cf. Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). The use of the term 'perspective' is deliberate, and symptomizes that there is no single theory of sensemaking, merely '…a set of ideas with explanatory possibilities' (Weick, 1995, p.ix). Contemporary interest in sensemaking dates from the 1960s, especially with Weick (1969) together with others such as Garfinkel (1967) and Polanyi (1967), who sought to explain how people experience 'reality' and how meanings are socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Initially, Weick took a strong cognitivist position: '…organizations exist largely in the mind, and…what ties an organization together is what ties thoughts together' (Weick and Bougon, 1986, p.102-3). More recently,

though, Weick has embedded his perspective in social constructivist theorizing that highlights the role of language in meaning production (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2014; Weick, et. al., 1995), a move that has been mirrored by the broader sensemaking community: '…in most current writing organizational sensemaking is …understood as fundamentally concerned with language' (Maitlis and Christianson (2014, p.81). Much attention has been devoted to narratives as '…the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.1) leading to studies emphasizing the polyphonic nature of sensemaking in organizing (Abolafia, 2010; Brown et al., 2008; Currie and Brown, 2003).

There have been many attempts to capture adequately and tersely the kernel of Weick's perspective on sensemaking (e.g., Brown et. al., 2015; Holt and Cornelissen, 2014; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2014). These tend to focus on three interlinked (and to some extent overlapping) notions *sensemaking*, *organizing*, and *enactment*. Sensemaking involves action (enactment) which is made sense of retrospectively by focusing on cues which are extracted, labelled and connected; this reduces equivocality, and through talk which sustains interaction accomplishes organizing. This rather dense rendering of Weick's position requires unpacking.

Sensemaking

Weick, and the broader sensemaking community, offer somewhat distinct characterizations of *sensemaking*. At its most general, sensemaking is a generic term that refers to diverse processes of interpretation, action and meaning production whereby people 'structure the unknown' (Waterman, 1990, p.41), reduce equivocality, and (re)produce their worlds. A more 'micro' perspective on these processes suggests that sensemaking involves a frame (such as an ideology or theory of action), a cue (that which is actively 'noticed' in present moments of experience)

and a connection (a relationship between the frame and the cue which creates meaning) (Weick, 1995, p.111). This sensemaking depends crucially on identity, is retrospective, enactive of social environments, social ('sensemaking is never solitary' (Weick, 1995, p.40)), ongoing ('People are always in the middle of things' (Weick, 1995, p.43)), focused on and by extracted cues ('To establish a point of reference…is a consequential act' (Weick, 1995, p.50)), and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy ('…what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story' (Weick, 1995, p.61)). Moreover, sensemaking is constitutive of organizing which emerges through sensemaking: sensemaking is a matter of authoring not just interpretation, it is a means of '…creation as well as discovery' (Weick, 1995, p.8).

Organizing

Rather than a single, simple definition of the temporary and dynamic nature of organizing, Weick provides several distinctive though overlapping characterizations of it which emphasize its behavioural, cognitive and linguistic/communicative features. Organizing is associated firstly with the behaviours which form its 'substance' or 'raw material' (Weick, 1979, p.4). On this reading, organizing refers to those ongoing improvisational practices by which equivocality – ambiguity due to multiple and often conflicting interpretations – is resolved (or reduced) '…in an enacted environment by means of interlocked behaviors embedded in conditionally related processes' (Weick, 1969, p.91). Second, organizing involves '…unique intersubjective understandings' being '…picked up, perpetuated, and enlarged' by those who did not participate in their construction such that people can substitute for one another, albeit with 'some loss of joint understanding' (Weick, 2005, p.72). Here it is 'generalizing' that is 'the prototypic act of organizing' as people 'hold things together' through the assignment of 'familiar categories' (Weick, 2006, p.1731). Third, recognizing that organizations are talked into existence, Weick (2006, p.1725) insists that organizing inheres in 'Repetitive cycles of

texts, conversations, and agents'. Organizing may involve everything from mutual effort to transactive memory, but it is only through continuous communication – processes of arguing, expecting, committing and manipulating – that we can 'see what we say', resulting in the generic subjectivity that reassures people '…that if they do not look too closely, the world makes sense and things are under control' (Weick, 1995, p.170).

Enactment

Integral to Weick's understanding of both organizing and sensemaking is his conception of enactment, which refers to those processes by which people create (enact) events and structures through their action. This is consonant with other social scientific theorizing. For example, Garfinkel (1967: 115) asserts that an '…actor's own actions are first order determinants of the sense that situations have, in which, literally speaking, actors *find* themselves'. Weick, though, elaborates on this basic premise in several interesting ways. In acting, people '…create the materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face' (Weick, 1995, p.31), and so enactment is in effect a 'bet' that an unfolding action will at some point in the future 'have made sense' (Weick, 2006, p.1729). Linguistic acts are of particular importance in organizations as situations are '…talked into being through interactive exchanges of organizational members' (Taylor and Van Every, 2000, p.33-4). Key to these processes are faith – for example that we are right and will not fail – which provides the energy and rationale for action, and improvisation, by which people are able to take the leap from apparently significant 'fact' to the authorship of complex 'realities'. These are processes in which actions and perceptions 'validate one another in ways that resemble self-fulfilling prophecies' (Weick, 1995, p.163) meaning that 'People create what they expect to find' (Weick, 1995, p.35). Indeed, in a world which is both unknowable and unpredictable it makes sense for action temporarily to displace wisdom because '…we need to act to see what we think' (Weick, 2006, p.1730).

Although cohered by reference to Weick whose scholarship acts as a centripetal force, the sensemaking perspective continues to be explored and extended by a substantial community. This has led to studies located in ever more diverse settings, ranging from staff in paediatric cardiac surgery (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2003), computer games development teams (Brown et al., 2008), newcomer socialization (Louis, 1981), jazz groups (Humphreys et. al., 2013), students' attempts to make sense of examinations (Patriotta and Brown, 2011) and counter-terrorist operations (Colville, et al., 2013). In this regard, it is worth noting that such is Weick's range and influence that he is (perhaps surprisingly) well published in accounting journals (Swieringa & Weick, 1982; Weick, 1983) and (less unexpectedly) a major focus of debate for academic accountants (Kalle & Strömsten, 2012; Libby, 1983; Miller & Power, 2013). While at first blush this theorizing might seem to be of limited applicability, it has in fact proved hugely generative, and according to Sandberg and Tsoukas (2014) it has most extensively been applied in studies of strategy and organizational change.

The Sensemaking Perspective and Strategy Research

Considerable attention has been paid to processes of sensemaking in the context of large-scale strategic change, especially how leaders seek to manage the interpretive schemes of organizational members (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Brown and Humphreys, 2006; Mantere et al., 2012). The attempts by leaders to mould the understandings of their subordinates, not always successfully, have been examined in, for example, a corporate spin-off (Corley and Gioia, 2004), an effort to transform a higher education college into a university (Humphreys and Brown, 2002) and mergers and acquisitions (Monin et. al., 2013). Other substantial allied bodies of research have surveyed issues of strategy and sensemaking with reference to organizational learning (Catino and Patriotta, 2013) and creativity and innovation (Jay, 2013), which sensemaking is said, generally to facilitate and improve. While some maintain that the

ability to manage meaning is a key leadership capability (Shamir, 2007), more often than not careful analysis reveals that processes of strategic change are accompanied by diverse and fragmented understandings among individuals and groups whose sensemaking is idiosyncratic (Maitlis, 2005; Walsh and Bartunek, 2011). One consistent finding from this research is that in those situations where sensemaking is inadequate or problematic there is a greatly increased chance of strategy failure (Nag et al., 2007; Yu et al., 2005).

Of particular note is that processes of sensemaking are key to the strategy-as-practice movement and its agenda '…to cast light on micro-processes of strategy-making, to link the micro to the macro, and to reveal what strategists actually do' (Brown and Thompson, 2013, p.1143). Indeed, being concerned primarily with 'the doing of strategy' and defining 'strategy' as 'a situated socially accomplished activity' (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009, p.69-70; Whittington, 2006), makes processes of sensemaking integral to a perspective that seeks to further '…the study of social complexity' (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009, p.70). As Neill and Rose (2007, p.305) have argued, 'Confronting complex situations is the hallmark of strategic decision-making', and this has led researchers to focus on strategy scenarios with high equivocality in which confusion and disagreement abound. This emphasis on sensemaking practices has become pronounced as sensemaking theorists, most notably Weick, have come to emphasize the linguistic character of social sensemaking, the linguistic turn forming much of the ground on which the strategy-as-practice literature has been built (Carter et al., 2008a,b, 2010, 2011). Empirical studies and extensive theorizing has focused on how sensemaking, strategizing and strategy implementation are entwined in narratives/stories (Boje, 1991; Brown, 2006; Brown and Humphreys, 2003), metaphor (Cornelissen, 2012), and other local and situated micro-discursive practices (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Vaara, 2003).

2. Research Methods

The primary source on which I draw is Martin (2014) which tells the story of the last thirty-four years of conflict in Helmand province, Afghanistan, as related to him by Helmandi informants. The book, which is based on his doctoral thesis, draws on three forms of data. First, Martin's experiences during 19 months of participant observation in Helmand as both a serving British Army Officer, (he was a cultural advisor), and as a researcher. Second, he conducted personally several series of interviews with key individuals, mostly men, none of whom were paid. These included 85 interviews conducted in Pushtu during 2011 and 2012 with tribal leaders, jihadi commanders, religious leaders, landowners, government and security officials and businessmen. The duration of these interviews varied between 30 minutes and 5 hours, and data were captured in hand written notes. He also conducted 11 interviews with NATO officials and an unspecified number of on–the–record interviews with 'key Helmandi and Western personalities' (Martin, 2014, p.13). Third, he made use of a data set collected by Farrell and Giustozzi which contained 50 interviews with Taliban commanders and 15 interviews with Helmandi notables[iii]. Despite this huge effort and extensive data set he declares that '…at times it has felt like nothing more than catching snippets of rumours passing on the winds of Helmandi gossip' (Martin, 2014, p.13)[iv].

Keen to emphasize his credentials as a sophisticatedly reflexive researcher he notes that some of his interviewees were working with forces attacking British and Afghan government personnel and that they '…were often attempting to use me, either to gain lucrative ISAF [the International Security Assistance Force] contracts, or perhaps to spread disinformation' (Martin, 2014, p.10). Somewhat contradictorily he notes that as a British Army officer he was 'as far as can be from being neutral' and yet maintains that '…I have done my utmost to detach myself and remain objective in this analysis' (Martin, 2014, p.14), which is indicative of the

curious position in which he found himself as both professional soldier and student. This is important in part because it highlights that Martin's (2014) work cannot be assumed in any sense to be a factual or neutral account of 'actual' historical events. Rather, it is best regarded as an 'artifact' that makes use of a specific and finite data set, together with multiple authorial strategies of selection, assemblage and omission to construct a highly personal set of understandings. Of course, the same is true of this paper, which I readily acknowledge is an 'artful product designed not just to inform but to persuade' (Brown, 2000, p.50), and incorporates many of my own prejudices, for example, regarding what constitutes worthwhile text-based discursive research (Brown, 2004, 2005; Brown et al., 2012).

My paper is not a 'conventional' discursive analysis of Martin (2014) but employs it to illustrate and to a lesser extent critique some of the ideas of Karl Weick. That said, this paper does draw on a rich vein of discourse analytic work in organization studies, especially that which has taken written texts (such as inquiry reports and web-sites) as its major source of data (e.g., Boudes and Laroche, 2009; Coupland and Brown, 2004; Sillince and Brown, 2009). This work is predicated on the assumption that quantitatively informed analyses of texts are of limited utility because 'words and phrases do not come ready packaged with a specified delimited meaning' (Parker, 2000, p.2), and that only a qualitative approach is able to highlight nuances of meaning (Hawkes, 1977). Accordingly, Martin's book was first read carefully and extensive notes made on each chapter. This was a laborious task as while the narrative is mostly related in a time-linear manner, it is packed with a wealth of apparently marginal information and anecdotal material, and much is left partially or un-explained. As I undertook this analysis I sought to link descriptions of people, actions and events to the concepts and frameworks for understanding developed by Weick. These processes were, like other similar-type research,

more explorative and intuitive than conventionally 'rigorous', as I sought to make connections and write sections that were interesting, informative and (hopefully) generative.

3. Making Sense of Strategy Failure: A case study of the war in Afghanistan

From the chaos of civil war in Afghanistan arose a movement of religious clerics, the Taliban, who were ideologically committed to their interpretation of Islam and who promised to restore social order (for a glossary of terms and people and a timeline of events please refer to Tables 1 and 2). To consolidate their position they ill-advisedly formed an alliance with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, and following attacks against the US on 11 September 2001, American troops invaded Afghanistan driving the Taliban from power. An internally-backed Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA), was set up under Hamid Karzai, recognized and supported by the international community. US Special Forces continued to locate and neutralize the vestiges of the Taliban, while assisting the Government in its efforts to rebuild the country. British troops deployed to Helmand, the largest province of Afghanistan, in 2006, as part of ISAF, in order, they said, to advance democracy and women's rights, support the Government, deliver reconstruction and development, and disrupt the narcotics trade. By 2014, the year by which ISAF declared that its forces would be withdrawn, it was unclear that any of the international community's objectives had been achieved: there had been little reconstruction, the economy was still based largely on opium, at a national level the same avaricious warlords had security control of the country, while at a local level in Helmand the same people still wielded guns in the villages.

Tables 1 and 2 about here please

Strategic Sensemaking

ISAF's dominant sensemaking narrative. The official ISAF storyline, which framed British and American understandings, took the form of an 'insurgency narrative'[v] which stated that '…there is a legitimate Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA), which is recognized and supported by the international community, but which is violently opposed by a movement of insurgents, called the Taliban, who have sanctuary in Quetta, Pakistan' (Martin, 2014, p.195). This narrative had at least three important corollaries. First, it had a strong moral aspect; it depicted the Taliban as illegitimate, religiously inspired, and opposed to democracy and women's rights which the GIRoA embodied and promoted. Second, it incorporated a particular view of both the Taliban and the Afghan government as distinct and relatively cohesive (if factionalized) organizations locked in a zero-sum battle for political control of Afghanistan. Third, it suggested (at least initially) that the Taliban were '…Maoist-style insurgents from outside who were terrorizing the community' (Martin, 2014, p.244); this was later modified to an extent, at least in terms of British thinking, as they came to understand the population as caught between the competing 'offers' of the Taliban and the Government. This sensemaking was strikingly different from that of the Afghan people.

Helmandis' dominant sensemaking narrative. Rather than an insurgency, the Helmandis understood what was happening as a continuing domestic civil war, with diverse embedded sub-conflicts, in which external powers, most notably the British and Americans, were participating to support their national interests. There were multiple strands to this narrative, most important of which was that until the arrival of the Americans the Taliban had been engaged in a struggle for political control with the Mujahidin commanders who had fought against the Soviets[vi]. With the Taliban routed, the Mujahidin commanders, who retained old networks and access to considerable funds and weapons distributed by the CIA and US Special

Forces, thrived under Western patronage. Continuing conflict between those who affiliated with the Taliban and those who associated with the GIRoA was accompanied by other struggles[vii]. Afghanistan is tribal, and the tribes, themselves internally differentiated, exist in a state of tension which leads often to violence. A strong spirit of individualism means that allegiances are fluid, and tribal differences are often overlaid by personal rivalries and petty jealousies[viii]. Many disputes centre on control of the opium trade and the precious land and water that supports it, resulting in innumerable intertwined and seemingly irresolvable conflicts[ix]. Moreover, external interference has long been a feature of Afghan history, and internal factions have become adept at manipulating outsiders to help them prosecute their local battles.

These sensemaking stories constituted the distinct frames within which ISAF and Helmandis interpreted the same cues, leading to their increasingly divergent understandings of what was happening, and this had profound implications for Afghanistan. While relatively neglected by the strategy-as-practice community, there is incipient recognition that narratological practices are fundamental to comprehension of what strategists do (Fenton and Langley, 2011). As Brown and Thompson (2013, p.1144) make clear, narrative practices '…shape strategic realities and strategists' subjectivities', and these in turn have significant consequences for action. In this instance, the social reality implied by the ISAF narrative was enacted by its military forces on the ground, leading both to strategy failure and, self-defeatingly, the resurgence of the Taliban.

Organizing: Strategy-in-Practice

The insurgency narrative by which ISAF made sense of the situation in Afghanistan was associated closely with six key interleaved 'strategies' in Helmand: (i) to support and

strengthen the GIRoA and state apparatus (notably the police) and to promote good governance; (ii) to neutralize the Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants; (iii) to provide security for the civilian population; (iv) to rebuild Afghanistan and its infrastructure; (v) to disrupt the narcotics (specifically opium) industry; and (vi) to win the hearts and minds of the people. Based on '…almost zero knowledge of the environment they were operating in' (Martin, 2014, p.112) the Americans and British set about implementing these strategies in practice.

(i) To support the Afghan Government

ISAF aimed strategically to build a strong, coherent, effective, politically stable government (GIRoA) that ruled with the consent of the Afghan people. However, what it had done was to expel from power one domestic political/religious coalition (the 'Taliban') and established another that consisted of corrupt, loosely aligned individuals and groups including the old Mujahidin commanders, who were intent on furthering their own individual, familial, tribal, territorial and/or religious interests. There then began an inter-commander war – for political influence, control of the opium trade, and latterly ISAF development contracts - that had devastating implications for Helmand. As Martin (2014, p.244) notes, NATO/ISAF strategy was to develop good governance, but 'improving governance becomes a nonsensical task when the individuals or groups in the Government are using ISAF to prosecute their own micro-conflicts'. ISAF continually was hamstrung by a lack of understanding of Helmandi society. For example, the British refused to work with the incumbent Governor, Sher Mohammad[x], even though he was '…probably the most powerful man in Helmand', and instated Governor Mangal who had a poor reputation among the Helmandis. The Americans spent eight years reliant on a few individuals (such as Mir Wali and then Haji Kadus) who manipulated them for personal and tribal gain.

(ii) To neutralize the Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants

The identification, capturing and killing of members of the Taliban and al-Qaeda was *the* key military strategy for both American and British military forces in Helmand, and huge resource was devoted to this, with little appreciable effect[xi]. One reason for this was a failure to understand the nature of their 'enemy'. ISAF insisted that the Taliban were mostly external, separate from both the GIRoA and local populations, unified, coherent and centralized. The 'Taliban' in Helmand, however were '…a shifting, patronage-based franchise "organization"' (Martin, 2014, p.243) consisting of a series of mahazes[xii], i.e. groups of fighters under local commanders with strong links to local areas[xiii]. This meant that if a fighter was killed he tended to be replaced by another family member seeking revenge[xiv]. Further, approximately 95% of all Taliban were Helmandis[xv] - villagers, farmers, patronage-seeking fighters, and local militiamen, whose reasons for fighting included defence of their villages and poppy crops, revenge, to evict foreigners, boredom, and a potent mix of internecine feuds and grievances. As a Helmandi milita commander said: '"The Taliban are the enemy…but they are local people, it is house on house fighting; the source of this war is the thirty years of fighting that has created badai on badai [revenge on revenge]"' (Martin, 2014, p.131). In most instances the Taliban could only operate through '…personal relationships with local elders and…the permission of the local community' (Martin, 2014, p.172)[xvi] and from 2004 onwards had the support of some senior GIRoA politicians.

The upshot of this failure in sensemaking was that American and British military made a series of seemingly random and largely uncoordinated interventions with '…no idea as to who their friends or enemies were' (Martin, 2014, p.163)[xvii]. The only clear-cut result of these activities was an intensification of violence. In this febrile milieu, ISAF forces fixated on often dubious information which they used to structure their operations[xviii]. For example, when Mohammad

Hashim, a prisoner under torture in Guantanamo, mentioned that there was an al-Qaeda-funded terrorist unit run by a tribal leader called Baghrani this 'unit' became a spectre for US Special Forces which then drove their operations in early 2003, even though there is no evidence that it ever actually existed[xix]. An attempt by the British in 2007 to re-take the sub-district of Musa Qala from the Taliban and install Mullah Salam, (who was believed to be friendly to ISAF), as governor, and which seemed initially to be a military success, was later discovered to be a fiasco; it transpired that there were three people called Mullah Salam operating in the area representing different tribes and interests, and the British had appointed the least significant of them (a petty commander) to control the area, who soon proved ineffective.

(iii) To provide security for the civilian population

While ISAF strategy was to bring peace and security to Helmand, this was not evident to the Helmandi population in practice. The American (and from 2006 British) forces sought to reduce violence in the province primarily by identifying and neutralizing members and former members of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in a mostly *ad hoc* manner but occasionally through 'big sweep' operations. Relying on a few tribal leaders/ex-Mujahidin commanders, often for no apparent reason other than that they were believed not to be aligned with the Taliban, ISAF forces were manipulated by these people to promote their economic interests, and to persecute tribal, familial and personal enemies[xx]. In effect, those individuals/groups with ISAF backing predated on those communities which did not. Unsupported people's, terrorized by Afghan 'government' militias, with no access to Western officials, and no aid payments being made to them, had little choice but to join with the loose coalition badged as 'Taliban'. Some specific policies, such as the US Special Forces offer of a bounty to anyone who was able to bring-in former members of the Taliban, particularly al-Qaeda, further intensified the personal

insecurity of civilians as it led to people denouncing anyone they had a feud with (including innocent people), in order to collect the money[xxi].

In this confused situation, local tribal commanders and their militias did what they had been doing for decades: they fought for power, protection, and drugs money; initiated kidnappings for ransom and assassinations; and brutalized each other's civilian populations. Rather than bring peace and provide security ISAF forces joined in the civil war which was itself overwritten with ongoing spats between rivals – personal, tribal, economic etc. – which Western forces naively regarded as 'Taliban' resistance and trouble-making.

(iv) To rebuild Afghanistan and its infrastructure

The rebuilding of Helmand was always a significant aspect of ISAF – notably British and American – strategy rhetoric. Yet, at first, only minimal improvement work occurred. From 2008 ISAF (in particular America) then pumped huge resource into Helmand as the West sought to upgrade local infrastructure, and to build schools and clinics. This money resulted in remarkably little development as it was given to government officials who simply helped themselves and enriched their more senior sponsors: money that was sent into Afghanistan's provinces moved upwards until it reached an elite in Kabul, whom the international community protected, from where it left the country (e.g., to bank accounts in Dubai)[xxii]. Helmandis blamed this colossal increase in corruption on foreigners' failure to understand how systems of patronage worked in Afghanistan and how actually to get things done. Two other features of this strategy merit special mention. First, often the locals did not want the development project that ISAF had granted them. Second, a project that benefitted one community frequently led to extreme jealousy among others[xxiii]. Continuously, ISAF aid teams relied on highly partisan individuals for guidance, and they ensured that resource was channelled to their preferred

tribes/regions (while often defining their enemies as 'Taliban')[xxiv]. In practice, rather than purchase the loyalty of Afghans, development money fed venality which fractured even further Helmandi society[xxv].

(v) To disrupt the narcotics (specifically opium) industry

The British and American military argued that the opium industry contributed financially to the Taliban (the 'narco-insurgent nexus') and sought to destroy it[xxvi]. As the lead nation charged with disrupting the narcotics trade, in 2002 the British sent a team to Helmand to finance a poppy eradication programme. However, at the request of the Governor of Helmand, Sher Mohammad, the team members did not leave the Bost Hotel, and the Governor was able to use the programme '…to target his rivals' fields and compensate his friends' (Martin, 2014, p.134). More fundamentally, in seeking to destroy the opium trade ISAF ignored the fact that 'Opium *is* the Helmandi economy' (Martin, 2014, p.246), that growers faced destitution if their crops were destroyed, that people joined the police and government in order to protect the opium trade, and in short that '…*everyone* is involved in it' (Martin, 2014, p.246)[xxvii]. Targeting the drugs trade appalled the local population and generated resistance, especially as ISAF protected the Helmandi and national government officials who made money from it. Of particular note here were ISAF's attempts to mentor and develop the police in order to serve and protect the people, not appreciating that the police in Helmand were effectively a series of squabbling local militias, many drawn from certain family networks and aligned with senior tribal commanders, whose main preoccupation was to administer the drugs trade. Other than leave some politically unprotected farmers/villages destitute only minimal damage was inflicted on the opium industry.

(vi) To win the hearts and minds of the people

Integral to ISAF's counter-insurgency narrative was the strategic requirement to win the hearts and minds of Helmandis. Initially, however, the British relied principally on military strength to accomplish mostly *ad hoc* goals; while the activities of American Special Forces in the province resembled what Martin (2014, p.127) describes as a 'reign of terror'. Helmandis' anxieties were not ameliorated by the destruction wrought by the British to people's houses (labelled enemy compounds) or indeed entire towns (such as Sangin). Time and again, trusted 'government' officials, in effect voracious local warlords, provided intelligence to the British and Americans which led them to prosecute various personal, clan and tribal feuds on their behalf. For example, an ex-Mujahidin commander called Dad Mohammad informed the US that the Ishaqzai Mistereekhel clan harboured members of the previous Taliban government leading US forces to persecute them and allowing Dad Mohammad to steal their drugs (Martin, 2014, p.128). Often, there was a lack of consistency in the conduct of the 'hearts and minds' strategy. For instance, in a belated attempt in 2009 to build relations with tribal leaders in Nad-e Ali a community council was set-up to distribute development funds, but this political work came to nothing as the British, having promised not to leave the area, then did so, forcing locals into an alliance with the Taliban to protect their poppy crop. Such actions did little to build rapport with Afghans, and the Helmandis came to regard the Americans with contempt (describing them as 'stupid') and the British, *the* historical enemy, with suspicion and hatred.

Making Sense of Strategic Sensemaking/Strategizing

In this section, I analyze what went wrong with ISAF sensemaking/strategizing focusing on issues of identity, extracted cues, plausibility and 'stickiness'. Martin (2014) catalogues multiple instances – at different levels of analysis and with varying time frames – of what may be regarded as 'paradigmatic' examples of Weick's conception of sensemaking, i.e. those

instances in which people retrospectively discern cues, and make seemingly plausible identity-consonant speculations in order to explain them which are shared socially, rendering '…the subjective into something more tangible' (Weick, 1995, p.14). Unfortunately, as Martin's (2014) account illustrates, people may continuously '…realize their reality by "reading into" their situation patterns of significant meaning' (Morgan et al., 1983, p.24) which are, arguably, fundamentally flawed. A group's commitment to a particular frame 'imposes a form of logic on the[ir] interpretation of action' (Weick, 1995, p.159), but this does not guarantee the appropriateness or efficacy of that interpretation or its correlative action(s).

A key plank of Weick's conception of sensemaking is that it is tied intimately to identity: 'Depending on who I am, my definition of what is "out there" will also change' (Weick, 1995, p.21). In this instance, the insurgency narrative to which ISAF adhered positioned them primarily as a military force rather than, say, as keeping the peace during a civil war, which would have constituted them as a peacekeeping force, and allowed very different forms of action. As Martin (2014, p.188) observes, the British and Americans defined 'the situation through the prism of their own existence' and this '…is why the "insurgency narrative" exists and is so resilient: it is linked intimately to ISAF's self-image and role in Afghanistan'. One explanation why there was so little questioning of the insurgency framing of events is because '…sensemaking occurs in the service of maintaining a consistent, positive self-conception' (Weick, 1995, p.23). Sensemaking may have '…a strong reflexive quality' (Weick, 1995, p.15), but a capacity for reflexivity does not necessarily result in adaptive learning, especially when this would require potentially critical self-reflection. Further, '…what we enact and how we interpret…affects what outsiders think we are (image) and how they treat us, which stabilizes or destabilizes our identity' (Weick et al., 2005, p.416). In this respect, Martin (2014, p.196) comments:

‘Helmandis, the greatest natural politicians that I have ever met, understood how ISAF conceptualized the conflict and presented information to them within an insurgency/counterinsurgency conceptual framework. This enabled them to continue manipulating the outsiders as before’.

Sensemaking is focused on and by extracted cues which ‘…become salient as a consequence of context’ (Weick, 1995, p.53) and ‘…tie elements together cognitively’ (Weick, 1995, p.54). It is ‘faith’ in these cues which sustains their ‘use as a reference point’ rendering them ‘important for sensemaking’ (Weick, 1995, p.53) not least because they facilitate action. That is, ‘In matters of sensemaking, believing is seeing’ (Weick, 1995, p.133). It is faith in the cueing information they relied upon to structure their understanding that perhaps, in part, explains why the British stuck rigidly to the strategy of installing the ‘wrong’ Mullah Salam as governor of Musa Qala. The importance of extracted cues in patterning action is illustrated also by the US Special Forces fixation on finding a supposed al-Qaeda-funded terrorist unit run by Baghrani. In these and countless other instances ISAF forces relied on information which animated actions generating outcomes (more cues) helping them to discover retrospectively what was occurring, but this sensemaking was hermetically sealed by commitment to an insurgency narrative: this meant that for the British, appointing the wrong Mullah Salam was a ‘better’ outcome than leaving the Taliban in control of Musa Qala; and for the Americans, ‘seek and destroy’ missions against the Taliban were sensible and justified whether or not the unit they were notionally pursuing actually existed.

Sensemaking involves people in a quest for plausibility, coherence, reasonableness and instrumentality; if notional ‘accuracy’ matters it is only within a particular frame and for pragmatic reasons, because ‘…people see and find sensible those things they can do something about’ (Weick, 1995, p.60). For ISAF troops operating on the ground the idea that ‘All possible truth is practical’ (Hall, 1878, cited in Sills and Merton, 1991, p.84 cited in Weick, 1995, p.59)

would doubtless have had considerable resonance. What is regarded as plausible, practical truth is guided by expectations which filter inputs such that people '…assimilate whatever is seen to whatever is expected' (Weick, 1995, p.146). Further, 'The more expected an event, the more easily it is seen or heard' (Bruner, 1986, p.46). In short, because sensemaking tends '…to be schema driven rather than evidence driven' (Weick, 1995, p.153), if a group strongly expects to find Taliban insurgents terrorizing innocent local populations, then that is what they will find. Then, taking committed action, such as attacking 'Taliban', further binds people to the sensemaking which prompts it. Irrevocable decisions of this kind provide '…the pillar around which the cognitive apparatus must be draped' (Kiesler, 1971, p.17). The commitment which led to action ties people to the beliefs that sustain further similar patterns of action (cf. Salancik, 1977, p.62). Commitment has 'epistemological consequences' (Weick, 1995, p.162) which can have catastrophic implications for action.

What is surprising, and most in need of explanation, is the apparent 'stickiness' of ISAF's dominant sensemaking story (i.e. the insurgency narrative). Weick's theorizing provides several further related lines of reasoning that are helpful here: 'A socially constructed world is a stable world, made stable by behaviorally confirmed expectations' (Weick, 1995, p.154) so changes in patterns of sensemaking and action often take (considerable) time. This is consistent with other theorizing – drawn on by Weick – which suggests that '…once a tentative explanation has taken hold of our mind, information to the contrary may produce not corrections but elaborations of the explanation' (Watzlawick 1976, p.50). Indeed, Weick (1995, p.84) writes of '…the ease with which delusions take hold and endure' and how sensemaking, if regarded as plausible, may persistently be '…sealed off from refutation' and exhibit 'self-sealing logics' which narrow people's attention. In those instances characterized by multiple discrepancies, ambiguities, and novelties, where there is extreme equivocality, arousal can lead

people to narrow and focus their attention, to ignore '…cues that are crucial for performance' (Weick, 1995, p.102) and '…to fall back on earlier, overlearned, often simpler responses' (Weick, 1995, p.102). What this implies is that sensemaking is an effortful and sometimes costly process that requires people to feel sufficiently motivated to surrender their existing accounts of the world and develop new understandings (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p.77). But this was not the case in this instance, where a strong identity and both ideological and behavioural commitment '"buffered"' actors from potential sensemaking triggers' (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p.78).

Strategic Enactment

Enactment refers to those processes of action which people engage in, and in doing so, create the matrix of opportunities and constraints they then face. In Helmand, the strategies of the Americans and the British, created the environment in which they operated, enacting conditions which led directly to the re-establishment of the Taliban. The GIRoA, which they supported, was weak, corrupt and factionalized, and the police ineffective. The ISAF strategy of strengthening the provincial government in Helmand in fact insulated it '…*against* the population' (Martin, 2014, p.251). Western powers were unable to provide security for the civilian population, meaningfully to rebuild Afghanistan and its infrastructure, intent on disrupting the narcotics industry on which people's livelihoods depended, confused and inconsistent in their operations, incapable of discerning who or what the Taliban were, and despised by Helmandis. These deficiencies were, moreover, embedded in a broader failing to understand the Helmandi people, their history and culture: while over time British knowledge increased it was '…never really enough to stop them being manipulated' (Martin, 2014, p.158). Three specific aspects deserve special mention.

First, ISAF never fully appreciated what Jean Mackenzie, an American journalist, has described as Helmandis '…deep, visceral aversion toward the British that defies rational explanation' (Martin, 2014, p.226). Helmandis are brought-up on stories of resistance to British colonial oppression. While the old Taliban networks were already strengthening such that towards the end of 2005 the province 'was approaching near anarchy' (Martin, 2014, p.143), it was the arrival of the British that helped the "Taliban" to consolidate and coalesce: groups persecuted by ISAF and Afghan government forces were joined by others that had actually been part of the UN-backed government and benefitted from US protection[xxviii]. The British intervention was '…a godsend for the Taliban movement' (Martin, 2014, p.172). Funding and recruitment were from then on 'non-issues for them' (Martin, 2014, p.172). Local Helmandis were aghast that the British were in their province, and the Taliban leadership in Quetta Shura skilfully took advantage of the situation by promoting the narrative that they were in Helmand to defeat the British. Indeed, although the Taliban were rooted in Helmandi society, the British presence helped to suck-in increasing numbers of foreigners – notably from Pakistan and Chechnya – who came to wage jihad against them.

Second, from late 2004 the UN administered a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Process (DDR) in which the four main commanders - Sher Mohammad, Mir Wali, Dad Mohammad and Abdul Rahman - and many subsidiary commanders, were supposed to be removed and disarmed. In effect, all that happened was that these commanders '…changed from working under the "government" patronage network…to working under a "Taliban" patronage network' (Martin, 2014, p.142). Confusingly for ISAF, Mir Wali and Sher Mohammad, the two greatest side-switchers to the 'Taliban', retained their positions as an MP and a senator respectively (Martin, 2014, p.145). This meant that the Taliban and the GIRoA were not distinct entities, and that the Taliban were now connected at the highest political

levels, making a mockery of ISAF's supposed goal of eliminating them. Again, it illustrates how in enacting a specific and (to ISAF members) seemingly sensible strategy to improve the governance of Afghanistan, they in fact strengthened Taliban networks and ensured that they were linked (and protected by ISAF) to the ruling political elite. As Gioa (2006, p.1715) comments: '…we create what we confront'.

Third, for Helmandis, the notion that the US and British were unable to understand the internal social, political and religious dynamics which were fundamental to their society was incomprehensible: the foreigners, especially the British, they reasoned, must have an ulterior motive for being there (Martin, 2014, p.138)[xxix]. In the main, they concluded that the British were seeking to destroy their province through an alliance with the Quetta Shura Taliban based in Pakistan and supported by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)[xxx]. Of course, Helmandis' sensemaking was, naturally enough given the confused state of the province, far from monolithic, though always motivated by 'a profound hatred of the Angrez' (Martin, 2014, p.226)[xxxi]. Some of the many hypotheses in evidence were that while the British supported the Taliban the Americans were fighting them[xxxii], that the UK and America were fighting a proxy war in their province, that the British and ISI wanted to ferment an Islamic war in Afghanistan so that Islam in the region was compromised, and even that Britain wanted to damage NATO in order to re-establish its empire[xxxiii]. As a result, Helmandis – or at least significant numbers of them – came to believe that they were fighting a war against colonial oppression, rendering the Taliban franchise a useful ally at a time of need. ISAF wanted there to be a Taliban insurgency and so enacted one: at first this was (arguably) as much a linguistic construct as a material one, though ultimately, ironically, it became all too 'real' as ISAF's initial 'bet' transformed into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Epilogue

In July 2010 ISAF declared it would withdraw its forces by 2014, and control over large areas was returned officially to Afghans through 2011-2013. The British/ISAF strategy of withdrawal in Helmand was supposed to be accompanied by the formation of village militias and local police forces (Afghan Local Police or ALP) which could protect their communities. A lack of British 'due diligence' though meant it was often unclear who was being armed. The ALP did not always have the support of what were sometimes fractured local communities, and many responded with alacrity to the opportunity to eradicate the poppies of poor farmers (labelled 'Taliban') for which they were paid a cash bonus of up to $1000 a day. Sometimes actual Taliban fighters joined ALPs (or reached understandings with the ALPs that their brethren now ran) and some ALPs even overtly re-badged themselves as 'Taliban'. In one instance, two local competing tribes both formed ALPs and, armed by the British, carried on their long-running disputes. The training and recruitment of new ALPs was halted nationwide in September 2012 as it had become clear that they served to reinforce local politics and rivalries rather than the Afghan state. Yet violence did diminish as, in effect, ISAF was paying Taliban-affiliates not to fight. Those who benefitted most, however, were the old commanders whose men were now re-badged as ALP:

'The ISAF narrative of bringing good governance in the wake of the rapacious warlords was somewhat contradicted by the fact that those same warlords regained security control through the ALP programme' (Martin, 2014, p.222).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

In this section, I consider several additional ways in which Martin's (2014) account of the war in Afghanistan might be theorized using a Weickian approach, some Weick-inspired practical advice for strategists, and a few limitations of the analysis I have offered; I then draw brief conclusions.

A substantial number of interrelated analyses of strategy failure in Afghanistan based on Weick's work might be elaborated. It could be theorized as failure due to strong commitment to a single frame which enforced 'premise controls' constituting 'professional blind spots' (Perrow, 1986). One aspect of this was that there was no specific crisis (a low-probability high-impact event threatening the viability of ISAF) that demanded the attention of strategists and policymakers; in times of war there are many intensely problematic events, and the threshold for an occurrence to be evaluated as a crisis – especially one that shatters fundamental assumptions – is relatively high as a result. It could be argued that *normalization* militated against effective pattern recognition such that, for example, incidents where Helmandis were known to have manipulated ISAF to prosecute feuds came to be regarded as occasional accompaniments rather than symptoms of an underlying failure to grasp fully the situation. This may have been allied to 'positive asymmetry' which results in people foregrounding '…the best characteristics and potentials of people, places, objects, and events' (Cerulo, 2006, p.6), a tendency that can be institutionalized into organizational practices and strategies, desensitizing them from cues that in this case may have led them to question the motives of those ISAF relied on for information.

An alternative explanation for ISAF's strategy failure might implicate the concept of 'simplexity' (Colville et al., 2012). This suggests that theirs was a failure to combine appropriately the requirement for requisite complexity of thought together with necessary simplicity of action. 'Sensemaking is…a balance of making sense through thinking and acting' (Colville et al., 2012, p.7) but this is hard to sustain when actors have no sensible stock of knowledge to draw on. In these circumstances what is thought to be 'context' may be '…a premature cognitive commitment' (Langer, 1989, p.37) from which things are seen that from other, more grounded vantages, do not exist. From a simplexity perspective, ISAF's problem

was that it leapt to act before sufficiently complicating its understanding, i.e. it failed to get an appropriate balance between thought and action, enacting an environment that jarred with the views of locals. The self-sustaining logics which dictated action were then held in place by a militaristic emphasis on top-down coordination and control (of decision premises) unleavened by sufficient creativity, imagination, improvisation or a reflexive quest for wisdom. The result was a conceptual frame that remained 'blind to granularity of subtle difference within the cues of current experience' (Colville, et. al., 2012, p.9; cf. Coville et. al., 2013).

How, then, might these failings have been addressed? One antidote to mutually reinforcing patterns of sensemaking-organizing-enacting based on self-justification and confirmation bias is '…the enactment of doubt…in order to expose wishful interpretations' (Weick, 2010, p.547; Kramer, 2007). This means organizing an ability to doubt existing (putative) insights, embracing contradiction, being genuinely open to new information and perhaps even seeking out controversy, none of which possibilities ISAF forces entertained. It would have meant being sufficiently alert (so as to notice discrepancies between the insurgency frame and actual events), aware (in order to generate conjectures about what anomalies implied) and prescient (so as to know what needed to be known) (Weick, 2010, p.545; Corley and Gioia, 2011). Such a disposition implies organizing for 'high reliability': dispensing with simplifying abstractions, learning from failures, and attending to the complexity of on-the-ground operations. In sum, problems centred on sensemaking might have been combatted through the kind of 'complex sensemaking' (Weick, 1993, 1995) that is associated with critical self-reflexivity, that is, the wisdom that derives from an ability to perceive 'the interconnectedness of things' (Bigelow, 1992, p.147) and an abandonment of narcissistic assumptions of omniscience and omnipotence (Brown and Starkey, 2000).

Finally, the analysis offered here incorporates many of the limitations of the Weick-inspired sensemaking perspective. This reading of the war in Afghanistan has, arguably, under-emphasized the importance of institutional and societal contexts. I have hinted that '…social context is crucial for sensemaking because it binds people to actions that they then must justify' (Weick, 1995, p.53) and that this social context is highly politicized: 'Interpretations can have no grounding outside of rhetorical exchanges taking place within institutional and cultural politics' (Mailloux, 1990, p.133). Nevertheless, there remains scope for enriching micro studies of sensemaking with an increased sensitivity to institutions, cultures and societies. Further, taking my lead from Weick and the sensemaking community generally, I have said little about how sensemaking is tied to emotions (though this is beginning to be addressed, e.g., Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis, 2013; Weick et al., 1995, p.146), prospective sensemaking (cf. MacKay, 2009; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012; Gephart et al., 2010), or the role of the body – perception, speech etc. – in sensemaking (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). Perhaps most perplexing of all, Weick is not interested in how processes of sensemaking are implicated in relations of power (Helms et al., 2010; Marshall and Rollinson, 2004); though while omitted from this study, I have tackled this issue elsewhere (Brown, 1998; Brown and Humphreys, 2006).

Conclusions

My analysis of Martin's (2014) account of the war in Afghanistan has shown how situations and environments '…are talked into existence' (Weick, 2006, p.1725) through processes of noticing and bracketing which simplify the world and focus attention, allowing the generation of a locally plausible sensemaking narrative. Such sensemaking is 'not about truth' but elaboration of the story such that it becomes sufficiently comprehensive to be '…resilient in the face of criticism' (Weick, et al., 2005, p.415). Infused with the spirit of American

pragmatism ISAF forces' hypotheses and postulates triggered action which not only transformed Afghanistan but helped '…to *make* the truth which they declare[d]' (James, 1992, p.908). Significant cues – such as obvious manipulations of ISAF by tribal leaders and distraught villagers horrified that their only source of income (poppy) was being destroyed – were ignored by those blinded by their commitment to their '…*selections* of reality' (Burke, 1945/1969. p.45). ISAF forces enacted an ongoing crisis in which their denuded sensemaking led to inappropriate actions which fed a vicious circle that continually threatened and ultimately undermined its most fundamental goals. A Weickian reading of what has happened thus (unsurprisingly) tallies with Martin's (2014, p.233) conclusion that '…in intervening without the required knowledge of local politics, outsiders have made the conflict worse'[xxxiv].

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Table 1

Selected Glossary of Terms and People

Abdul Rahman	Tribal leader and fighter
Baghrani	Tribal leader and fighter
Dad Mohammad	Mujahidin commander, ally of the Taliban and Kharzai government, and then head of the Afghan National Directorate of Security
GIRoA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
Haji Kadus	Mir Wali's subordinate on whom the US relied for 8 years
Hamid Kharzai	President of Afghanistan 2001-2014
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
Ishaqzai Mistereekhel	An Afghani tribe
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, with strong links to the Helmandi Taliban
Mangal	Governor of Helmand 2008-2012
Mir Wali	Mujahidin commander and then MP
Mohamed Hashim	Guantanamo prisoner
Mujahadin	'Holy warriors'. Both those who historically fought against the Soviets and those who then fought against the GIRoA called themselves 'mujahadin'
Nad-e Ali	Area of Helmand Province, Afghanistan
Salam (Mullah)	Petty Taliban commander made district governor of Musa Qala in 2007 by the British
Osama bin Laden	Head of the al Qaeda network
Quetta Shura Taliban	The leadership shura of the Taliban in Pakistan
Sher Mohammad	Tribal leader, Governor of Helmand 2001-2005, then a senator
Taliban	Originally a movement of religious clerics, ideologically committed to their interpretation of Islam, and latterly a loose coalition/franchise movement opposed to Western occupation and the GIRoA

Table 2

Timeline of Selected Key Events Affecting Helmand

1839–1842	First Anglo-Afghan War
1878–1880	Second Anglo-Afghan War
1919	Third Anglo-Afghan War
1978	Saur revolution (Communist coup)
December 1979	Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
1988/89	Soviet withdrawal
1992-2001	Increasing and then dominant influence of Pakistan in the context of continuing civil war
1995	Taliban establish control of Helmand
11 September 2001	al-Qaeda attacks against the US
October 2001	US (and some UK) forces work with the Northern Alliance to topple the Taliban. The GIRoA is established under President Karzai
2002	US 'Special Forces' deploy to Helmand
2004	UN administered Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Process (DDR) leading to the strengthening of Taliban networks
2006	British forces deploy to Helmand (regarded by Helmandis as the Fourth Anglo-Afghan War)
2008	Governor Mangal appointed
2008-	Increasing emphasis on development led to huge sums of money being distributed and corruption was rife
2009-2012	America surges up to 20,000 troops into Helmand
2010	ISAF attempts to create an effective Afghan Local Police (ALP)
July 2010	ISAF declares it will withdraw its forces by 2014
2011-	The British begin to retreat and cede control of large areas of Helmand to locals
2012	Governor Mangal sacked. The training and recruitment of new ALPs halted.
2014	Full ISAF withdrawal

Notes

[i] In February 2014 the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) asked for the book to be pulped, claiming it breached the Official Secrets Act and used classified material uncovered by Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. Dr Martin and his publisher denied this, but as a result, the 31-year-old author quit the military in disgust after serving for ten years.

[ii] Three of the most obvious in-practice limitations, are that Martin's (2014) (and so my) analysis: (i) focuses not on Afghanistan in general but Helmand, the largest Afghan province, in particular; (ii) is less concerned with NATO/ISAF than the activities of the American and especially British military; and (iii) weaves together a somewhat curious mix of history, policy, incident and anecdote from which clarity (at least to this reader) does not always emerge.

[iii] No further details regarding this data set are provided and it is undated and not referenced.

[iv] He reports that a Helmandi suggested he [Martin] knew '…about 1 percent of what went on' (p.158), and Martin himself writes that 'Helmandis continually manipulated me' (p.158).

[v]The British Army definition of an insurgency is: '…an organized, violent subversion used to effect or prevent political control, as a challenge to established authority' (quoted in Martin p.248).

[vi] In Afghanistan there is a long-standing tendency to produce local warlords who exert political power by dint of military might.

[vii] Traditionally, Pushtun society is governed by three power structures, tribal, state and religious, which overlap and pull people in different directions, causing considerable disequilibrium.

[viii] Indeed, even small villages may be divided into clans which harbour their own inter-clan grudges

[ix] Primogeniture is not a feature of Pushtun society and consequently cousin warfare is exceptionally common as they contest violently their grandfather's land inheritance.

[x] Sher Mohammad was tribal head of the Alizai and Mir Wali tribal head of the Barakzai, (the two largest tribes in Helmand). Abdul Rahman was the most prominent member of the third largest tribe, the Noorzai, and held the balance of power. There were continuing alliances, competition, and tensions between the three men, much of it centred on control of the drugs trade. The fourth major tribe were the Kharoti.

[xi] By mid-2010 there were 30,000 ISAF troops in Helmand tasked with fighting a counter-insurgency.

[xii] Of course, 'The Taliban is evolving as a movement' (Martin, 2014, p.208). From 2008 the Taliban central leadership tried to enact a centralized nezami (organized system) under Zakir (a prominent commander), and funding was channelled down this single chain to decrease factionalism. Money generated in the Middle East was used by the Quetta Shura to create a patronage network that transferred funds through Pakistan to Afghanistan. In other provinces the nezami system has been successful, but Helmand has resisted the system for three reasons: i. there is huge resource in Helmand: income from drugs, ISAF supply contracts and development funds much of which is diverted (e.g. by government figures who are also Taliban commanders) to support the mahazes. As money could be made from other sources, so the nezami system had no sway; ii. the hierarchical Pushtun tribal system supports the mahaz system in which key families cycle resources and land maintaining social stability; iii. there is competition for influence from Iran which has strengthened its interactions with some mahaz commanders, seeking to protect its water supplies and the Shia population in Afghanistan. The Mahaz commanders in Helmand continue to act at least semi-independently.

[xiii] Mahaz commanders ranged in prestige depending on their standing in Helmandi society. Often an area had different mahazes answering to different leaders with different sources of funding, and conflict between them was not uncommon.

[xiv] In some instances families and communities sent their young men/sons to fight with different Taliban groups for protection.

[xv] There is, moreover, a fundamental distinction to be made between those mahazes featuring the 'aslee' (real) Taliban and those characterized as the 'daakhlee' (internal Helmandi) Taliban. The 'aslee' are those whose leaders have strong links to the Quetta Shura in Pakistan, and are supported by the ISI which provides them with resources and 'professional' skills such as bomb construction. It is these people who commit acts that local Taliban would not countenance such as burning schools. One subset of these are the akidawee (ideological) Taliban who fight in response to jihad obligations. The Daakhlee Taliban, who comprised the overwhelming majority of all 'Taliban' were in fact local Helmandis with deep roots in their community and personal reasons for fighting.

[xvi] 'The community replaced fighters if they were wounded or killed' (Martin, 2014, p.172).

[xvii] Another complicating factor that militated against military success was that there was little coordination between the British and American forces in Helmand, and some US/British tensions, which were skilfully exploited by local Helmandis for their own benefit.
[xviii] Those on whom ISAF forces relied learned very quickly to represent their aggression in terms consistent with British and American strategies, generally as 'attacks against the Taliban' or 'drugs raids on smugglers'.
[xix] Baghrani was already a target for American search and capture operations because he had been labelled as 'Taliban' by his tribal enemies, Mir Wali and Sher Mohammad.
[xx] For example, wishing to establish checkpoints in Babaji, the British used guides from the Barakzai tribe; this dismayed the elders of mixed communities in the area who were being attacked by members of the Barakzai.
[xxi] Once arrested, a prisoner often was sent to Guantanamo Bay prison.
[xxii] ISAF officials were evidently aware of corruption but did nothing, damaging further its reputation with Helmandis.
[xxiii] As one interviewee said to Martin, "jealousy is the biggest enemy of all' (Martin, 2014, p.138).
[xxiv] 'The US Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) was physically protected by Abdul Rahman's men, so it became impossible for non-allied communities to access US decision-makers or resources' (Martin, 2014, p.138).
[xxv] Development projects sometimes caused great resentment. The US strategy was to re-build the Kajaki dam (a $226m project) in southern Afghanistan to provide water and power. The Alizai who lived around the dam would not benefit from it and wanted an irrigation canal. They were also worried that the foreigners would eradicate their poppy crop. Iran was concerned that a dam would mean that less water would flow into their Sistani region and sponsored fighting groups. Those fighting considered themselves resistance fighters and were supported by local communities: resistance was strong.
[xxvi] The CIA gave this argument little credence.
[xxvii] Helmand is an agricultural society, the crop of choice is opium poppy, and the province produces approximately ninety percent of Afghanistan's opium.
[xxviii] The British deployed to Helmand largely because the Canadians wanted Kandahar and the Dutch wanted Uruzgan. Unaware of these machinations the Helmandis themselves, including some in government, were puzzled why the 'hated' British, were returning after 126 years.
[xxix] Their suspicions were raised further when they witnessed US and British talk about rebuilding the country contradicted by actions in which they beat people to death in custody, sent children to Guantanamo, promoted cruel and despicable people to positions of power, paid money to Taliban members, and generally operated a regime of violence.
[xxx] According to Martin (2014, p.273) the ISI 'Heavily financed the Taliban during 1995-2001' and there is 'strong evidence that they are currently providing assistance to the Taliban Quetta Shura'.
[xxxi] While some did disparage the British and Americans as 'stupid', generally there was a failure among Helmandis to realize that Westerners were unknowingly politically supporting, militarily arming and paying money to members of the Taliban. The apparently 'more reasonable' argument made was that the British did not give up colonial control of Pakistan after its partition from India in 1947 because no country would voluntarily give up power, Pakistan controls the ISI, and the ISI controls the Taliban. Additional support for this narrative was provided by the oft-mentioned 'facts' that the Pakistani state has changed little since 1947, the Pakistani Army is modelled on the British Army, and Britain gives aid to Pakistan (and so either directly or indirectly funds the Taliban). Iranian and Pakistani authorities encouraged these views. The ISI told their own Taliban commanders that the money and weapons they supplied them with came from the British. Certainly, there were Taliban commanders who believed that there was a deal with the British and were piqued when they were attacked by them. Those Martin interviewed reported multiple incidents where the British had unwittingly supplied the Taliban or colluded with them, 'proving' that they were allies.
[xxxii] Martin (2014) notes also that there were well-established narratives that the Americans supported the Taliban by sponsoring the ISI and through supply contracts.
[xxxiii] More senior Helmandi commanders realized that the idea Western powers supported the Taliban was ridiculous, but only because they had actual experience of dealing with the British and Americans and realized how ignorant and incompetent they were.
[xxxiv] The 'much-vaunted Taliban reconciliation process' (Martin, 2014, p.245) seems destined to fail. Even if its leaders can be persuaded to make peace, they have little influence over individual actors fighting in Helmand '…the overwhelming majority of whom are fighting for personal reasons' (Martin, 2014, p.245). Those fighting to protect their drugs crops will continue to do so, while states such as Iran and especially Pakistan have a strong vested interest in an unstable Afghanistan.